

February 8, 2002

Dear Reverend Fathers and Sunday Church School Directors,

I hope you had a blessed Christmas and may the New Year bring peace, joy and another opportunity for new beginnings for all of us.

At this time of the year it is not unusual for Sunday Church School attendance to begin to drop. This is when we need and look for new programs and incentives to help us motivate our parents and students to return to Church and Sunday Church School. Our Archdiocese has an excellent program in place that can benefit our students. Some of you may already be aware of this.

The St. John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival began in 1983 as an educational program for Greek Orthodox teenagers. The purpose of the St. John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival is to give teenagers an opportunity to learn, write, and speak about their Orthodox Faith, Church and Heritage. This strengthens their understanding and appreciation of their identity as Greek Orthodox Christians, and cultivates spiritual growth and maturity. In 1990 its outreach was expanded to children in the elementary school.

The Saint John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival is an excellent tool to boost our attendance and to mentally and spiritually challenge our students when this program is incorporated into the Sunday Church School curriculum. By bringing in the Oratorical Festival into the Sunday Church School program, greater awareness and support will be derived from the parents and community in the importance of our children's religious education.

Here are some practical examples that we have done at Annunciation Cathedral of Houston the past 15 years:

In the elementary level, Grades Kindergarten through 6, the Oratorical Festival has been used as an open house opportunity for parents, relatives, and other interested parish members. We provide three open houses as follows: In January, Grades Kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> give presentations from the curricula topics they have covered the first half of the year. In this young group, the presentations may be a question and answer session for the whole group by the teacher. Those students who make short presentations sometimes incorporate artwork to illustrate their oral presentations.

In February, Grades 3 & 4 select a topic they have covered during the year or their saint or feast day, research, and write a short presentation which they present orally. The following month, Grades 5 & 6 does the same.

To have a successful elementary Oratorical Festival program, here are some things you will need to provide:

- An elementary Oratorical Festival chairperson,
- A room large enough to accompany parents and students,
- A simple sound system,
- Informed parents who know what is expected of their children,
- Prepared students who have worked in the classroom with their teachers and at home with their parents on their written and oral presentation,
- An Elementary Oratorical Festival Certificate for each participant, signed by the parish priest and the child's teacher,
- Written invitations to the parents.

Parents must also be kept informed to give them an opportunity to participate in their child's spiritual growth. Some will spend time at home to help their children with their presentations. We do not have judges in the elementary level. On the actual presentation date, adults in attendance are always amazed at what the children have to say and how much they know about their faith. Overall, it is a very positive and fulfilling event for the children and parents.

The middle school (junior division) and high school (senior division) parish Festival is set on another date, well in advance of the Diocese Festival date to secure reasonable airfare and complete and mail the paper work to the Oratorical Diocese chairperson. The work begins months before the date of the Oratorical Festival. The Annual Resource Companion (ARC) and Oratorical Festival Kit is secured from the Department of Religious Education (800-566-1088). The ARC is a \$5 little book filled with helpful articles to assist the kids in writing on one of the

six assigned topics. The topics for each division are listed in the ARC on page 243 with explanations and a bibliography. Each participant, middle school and high school Sunday Church School teacher, and Oratorical Festival chairperson should also have a copy of this book. The top junior and senior division speaker from the parish Festival will be chosen by a panel of judges and will go on to participate in the Diocese Oratorical Festival (April 12-14, Denver, CO) and possibly Archdiocese Oratorical Festival (June 7-9, Norfolk, VA).

The theme of this year's Festival is "The Theology and Dogma of the Orthodox Church." The topics in this year's Oratorical Festival are the best I have seen. Regardless, we all know how difficult it is to motivate today's adolescents. They are so busy with school, extra curricular activities, Spring break, work, and all the other things kids are involved in these days that the last thing most of them want to do is research and write another paper. This is where we come in. As directors of the Sunday Church School we can order extra copies of the ARC to hand out to the kids after we have talked to them about the Oratorical Festival and how this book can help them research and understand their topic. We must also provide other resources necessary to write a paper on any of the Oratorical Festival topics they choose. We can look in our Church library, the clergy's library and order the books that we do not have on hand listed in the general bibliography. We may need more than one copy in case several kids pick the same topic.

Since we don't have a set curriculum for the Sunday Church School upper grades, we can use the Oratorical Festival topics as our curriculum. Topics can be assigned to the Sunday Church School director, teacher, clergy, youth minister, or someone in the community who is knowledgeable in the faith to make presentations to the students covering a different topic each week. Class time, teacher support and resources should be provided to students during Sunday Church School to work on presentations.

It is wise to hold the Parish Oratorical Festival in Church, preferably after the Divine Liturgy when parents and students are already there. The fellowship hall is usually not conducive for this event because it is difficult to get people's attention when they are use to visiting and having coffee with their friends in this environment.

Incentives may sometimes be the catalyst to motivate middle school and high school students to participate in this excellent program. Although some may be opposed to this method, we participate in many things in today's society because of incentives. For example, we shop at grocery stores that give us coupons to buy certain products in their store at lower prices, we take our children to McDonalds because they give toys with Happy Meals, and we enroll in book clubs because they offer six books for \$1. If some students are motivated by incentives, it is still an opportunity for them to learn more about our Orthodox Faith and share their knowledge with family and friends. In our parish we pay airfare, hotel and any costs related to the Diocese and Archdiocese Oratorical Festival to the winner of the Junior Division and Senior Division as well as that of the chaperone. We also give a cash award of \$100 for the Junior Division winner and \$200 for the Senior Division Winner. On a parish level, we give each participant an Oratorical Festival Certificate and a book or icon. There are some parishes that offer airfare and costs to the Ionian Village Camp. Although many communities do not have budgets for these incentives, sometimes, fraternal organizations (Philoptochos, AHEPA, Daughters of Penelope, etc.) or anonymous donors provide funds. The Archdiocese Oratorical Festival awards both Senior and Junior Divisions from \$500 to \$2,000 to participants.

In the final analysis, all of these suggestions I have discussed in involving our youth in the St. John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival through the Sunday Church School are difficult but doable. It is well worth the effort. I truly believe that this program is important in several ways. First, when our students participate in this program by preparing, writing and presenting a topic of their Faith, we are making them think and we are stretching their minds; second, when parents come to this program and listen to what kids have to say, they realize their own children's capabilities and get a better idea of what kids are doing in Sunday Church School; and finally, parents come to a realization of the importance of making a greater effort to bring their children to Church and Sunday Church School because they are really being taught their faith. As Christian educators, this program helps us in molding our student's Christian character and the values that will guide them for the rest of their lives.

Sincerely,  
Irene Cassis  
Denver Diocese Coordinator of Religious Education